



Peers back minimum price per alcohol unit if Scotland scheme works

Introduction of 50p base rate should go ahead if it is shown to reduce excessive drinking, says Lords select committee

Staff and agencies

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Minimum unit pricing for alcohol should be introduced across the UK if it proves a success in Scotland, a Lords committee has said.

If the decision to introduce a 50p base rate per unit of alcohol is shown to reduce excessive drinking, it should to be rolled out nationwide, the Lords select committee on the Licensing Act 2003 said.

The plan means a 70cl bottle of whisky would cost a minimum of £14.

In December, the Scotch Whisky Association said it would appeal to the UK supreme court against a Scottish court ruling that plans for a 50p minimum price were compatible with EU law.

The coalition government pledged in March 2012 to bring in minimum unit pricing but made a U-turn in July 2013, earning condemnation from medical organisations and arousing suspicions that it had caved in to alcohol industry lobbying.

A government report released late last year found that alcohol is now the biggest killer of people aged between 15 and 49 in England, accounting for 167,000 years of lost productivity annually and a factor in more than 200 illnesses.

Peers have also called for a major overhaul of how licensing decisions are made after hearing evidence that some councillors were guilty of a “scandalous misuse” of their powers.

In addition, the Lords committee called for the Licensing Act to be redrawn to abolish local authority licensing committees and hand their role to planning watchdogs at councils instead.

The committee’s chairwoman, Lady McIntosh of Pickering, said the act was fundamentally flawed and needed a major overhaul.

“It was a mistake and a missed opportunity to set up new licensing committees when the planning system was already available to regulate the use of land for many different purposes,” she said.

“The planning system is well suited to dealing with licensing applications and appeals, and the interests of residents are always taken into account.”

The committee was shocked by some of the evidence it received on hearings before licensing committees.

“Their decisions have been described as ‘something of a lottery’, ‘lacking formality’, and ‘indifferent’, with some ‘scandalous misuses of the powers of elected local councillors’,” McIntosh said.

Referring to evidence that councillors had refused to listen to arguments at hearings, or to stand down when family members were involved in the situation, the report said: “These are scandalous misuses of the powers of elected local councillors, and they are not the only ones we were told of.

“The Derbyshire police wrote: ‘It has become too political with councils being frightened of making a tough decision for fear of an appeal against them by big brewing companies, etc. On two occasions I have had councillors state that they have agreed with the police, however, sided with the pub company for fear of an appeal.’”

The Lords committee said: “The evidence received against local authority licensing committees was damning and the committee was extremely concerned by what it heard. Planning committees are much more effective, reliable and well-equipped to make licensing decisions.”

McIntosh also called for relevant legislation to apply at airports: “We cannot understand why the government has decided not to apply the Act to sales at airports. This can lead to dangerous situations, and must be changed.”

The committee also warned regulations covering late night opening do not work.

“The night-time economy needs regulating; even in these areas of cities, residents have their rights. The current systems are not being used because they do not work.”

The report also called for establishments to provide a disabled access statement when applying for a licence.

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